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Fictions of Organized Crime: Introduction

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As Andrew Pepper has observed, crime fiction is one of the most significant popular means of exploring the contradictions that emerge from the modern, capitalist nation state. Pepper argues that traditional crime fiction is a genre which developed as a result of the fact that the State assumed control of the justice system. The genre produces, however, "a contradictory account of the state, as both necessary for the creation and maintenance of collective life and central to the reproduction of entrenched socio-economic equalities" (2). Pepper draws on traditional crime fiction, centred, as he puts it, on "a figure appointed by the state or an auxiliary" (1), in other words, a detective. Such fiction is largely concerned with the detection and bringing to justice of aberrant, criminal individuals, with the State (and/or its auxiliaries) acting as the guarantor of that justice, albeit in often contradictory and flawed ways. When it comes to fictions of *organized crime*, however, a different paradigm and a different framing of the relationship between crime and the State emerges.

Charles Tilly argues that the form of the nation state itself, specifically the monopoly on violence and its war-making tendency, is rooted in a kind of "protection racket" where the state "creates a threat and charges for its reduction" (171). He goes on to explore how producing and controlling violence "favoured monopoly" (175)—to this we might add the protection and control of trade and the protection of rents. The idea of the nation state, not as the guarantor of justice, but as a structure larger than any single individual, which extorts, coerces and charges rents—a structure that replicates many features of organized crime groups—explains the central focus of this collection: the responsibility or otherwise of the State for organized crime and the ways in which cultural representations engage with this unpalatable reality.

The articles in this collection analyse a range of fictional and semi-fictional cultural forms—novels, TV series, films, and popular music—which deal with organized crime, widely understood. All are concerned, in one way or another, with untangling the complex interconnection between criminal organisations and the State. While often posited as aberrations external to the State, a major theme of the articles is that these organisations often work in concert with it. In fact, in many of the settings explored here, the State itself appears as a criminal actor. The contradiction, or dilemma, lies in the fact that even in this constellation of entanglement or collusion, the State remains the only entity with the potential to control organized crime.

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What the articles in this collection also demonstrate, is that fictional representations of organized crime often exceed the boundaries of the nation state. Ours is a global criminological imaginary. As we move further into the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is tempting to draw a link between the growth in paranoia and conspiracy theories, and the ongoing popularity of fictional representations of organized crime. How else to deal with the cognitive dissonances produced by the gaps between slogans that promise to make countries "great" or "sovereign", on the one hand, and the material realities of yawning inequity, on the other hand, than by explaining them as the work of shadowy forces, working for evil, in league with corrupt politicians?

Despite the global nature of the contemporary criminological imaginary, the articles in this themed issue suggest that when it comes to organized crime, Mexico, Colombia and Italy remain potent—if not archetypal—sites for exploring the activities of mafias and cartels, as well as their links with the State. This is partially a reflection of the historical strength of criminal organisations in those countries but is also—perhaps more significantly for our purposes—indicative of their dominance in the global cultural imaginary. Indeed, in contexts in which journalistic reporting on organized crime may be fatally dangerous to the author it has been suggested that fiction is the privileged medium for exposing the logic of organized crime (Astorga Almanza).

While fictional accounts of organized crime offer a nuanced and complicated way in which readers, viewers, and listeners can 'make sense' of worlds which are secretive, obscure, and impenetrable to them, unlike in the crime fiction analysed by Pepper, detectives and police figures do not feature strongly here. The role of detectives in Latin American crime fiction, for example, has long been questioned. As Carlos Monsiváis observed back in 1973 in the wittily titled "Ustedes que jamás han sido asesinados" ["You who have never been murdered"], "una policía juzgada corrupta de modo unánime no es susceptible de crédito alguno: si esta literatura [policial] aspirase al realismo, el personaje acusado casi nunca sería el criminal verdadero y, a menos que fuese pobre, jamás recibirá castigo" (2) ["police forces that are unanimously judged to be corrupt are not worthy of any credit whatsoever: if detective fiction was to aspire to realism, the person accused would never be the real criminal and, unless they were poor, would never be punished"]. Glenn S. Close, in a 2006 exploration of the Latin American *novela negra* [crime novel], went as far as to declare the death of the detective in contexts in which "capitalist and consumerist objectification and quotidian violence defy formulaic ideological containment" (147). Unlike the individually motivated murders found in detective fiction, fictions of organized crime tend to be messy and opaque, resisting explication by morally mediating figures that represent the authority of the State. In their absence, writers and other cultural creators have sought alternative means to expose organized crime, often by making anti-hero protagonists of the kingpins. But whether such culture does work to expose, or unwittingly comes to support its machinations, is another of the central questions that occupies critics, as this collection evidences.

A lesson can be taken from the death of the famous fictional Latin American detective Lönnrot, the overly credulous private investigator killed by the criminal mastermind Red Scharlach at the end of Jorge Luis Borges's short story "La muerte y la brújula" ["Death and the Compass"]. Lönnrot's folly is to over-interpret, to search for too much of a pattern, and this is what leads him into the trap laid by Scharlach. Borges's can be read not only as a cerebral mockery of the neatness of traditional whodunnits, and of those who would seek rationality and logic in the worlds of crime. In casting Lönnrot as a misguided reader, Borges reflected Tzvetan Todorov's structural analysis of detective fiction in which the latter cites one of S. S. Van Dine's maxims for writing crime fiction: "With regard to information about the story, the following homology must be observed 'author : reader = criminal : detective'" (49). Although Van Dine is only giving instructions to writers, the idea of the author as criminal remains a potent one.

In terms of the culture industry and popular fictional representations of organized crime, a frequent accusation is that rather than making sense of and exposing worlds of criminality, the culture industry is profiting from crime, albeit indirectly. As John Kraniauskas has argued, fictional representations of narcoculture are not merely mimetic, they are *an integral part of that culture* (239). Indeed, when the business models of organisations such as the Mexican and Colombian cartels and Italian mafias are dependent on their reputations as violent and ruthless (Bourgois 68), it is not hard to see how any representations that enhance these reputations can ultimately work to support these organisations. But glamorization and glorification are not the primary concerns here; rather, most of the contributions to this collection are concerned with the way culture can work perniciously to, in the words of Persephone Braham, cast "criminals and victims as unknowable, ubiquitous, and inevitable" (120).

The possibility that writers and other cultural creators can act, albeit unwittingly, in the service of organized crime, coupled with the death or disappearance of the detective, leaves readers, viewers, and listeners alone in Van Dine's equation. What many of the contributions to this themed issue show is the willingness of *critics* to assume the position of moral and intellectual arbiters/mediators of criminal cultures. The task of the intellectual faced with the fictions of organized crime is to separate criminally complicit cultural forms from those which work to usefully expose criminal worlds. At the risk of simplifying the complexities and nuances of these contributions, what they do at root is to arbitrate, placing the cultural products they analyse on a continuum from, at one end, supporting organized crime to, at the other, a necessary and courageous revelation identified by Antoine Ducoux (in the third contribution to this collection) as a kind of *parrhesia*—or truth telling—assumed to be crucial if organized crime is ever to be successfully challenged. Critics do not only stop at cultural detection, however; what these articles also demonstrate is their assumption of the role of juror and judge in a gesture which aims to compensate for the compromised State.

Thus, in the first article here ("Paramilitarism without Paramilitaries: *Tres Caínes* and the Representation of Paramilitarism on Colombian TV Screens"), Et-

tore Asoni explores how the popular Colombian TV series *Tres Caínes* (2013), a saga about the historical paramilitary organisation Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), despite seeming to condemn the brothers who led it, in fact works against the promotion of lasting peace in Colombia. It does so by cleaving closely to the human rights and transitional justice rhetoric which has, as he shows, placed responsibility for structural and systemic problems at the feet of a few individuals whose actions are explained by a simplistic binary of victims and victimisers. Rather than promoting peace, the critical (detective) reading reveals that despite its pacificst guise, *Tres Caínes* amounts to reactionary, warmongering propaganda.

The second contribution—titled "New Culprits, True Culprits: The Re-politicization of Mexican 'Organized Crime' in *Crimen de estado* (2009) and *Ingobernable* (2017–2018)"—performs a similar operation, albeit with an opposite conclusion. Matteo Cantarello enters into the Mexican debate on representations of narcoculture, the terms of which have largely been set by Oswaldo Zavala's excoriation of the *narconovela*. Zavala's argument is that this genre (a sub-type of the *novela negra*), despite its high-culture pretensions and distance from cultural forms directly commissioned by narcos such as—in some cases—the *narcorrido*, has worked to "depoliticize" understandings of Mexican organized crime by exonerating the entity that bears the most responsibility: the State. Cantarello argues that the novel *Crimen de estado* (2009) and the Netflix series *Ingobernable* (2017–2018) buck the trend of depoliticization, working to demonstrate the involvement of the higher echelons of the Mexican state in organized crime. For Cantarello, these works are particularly valuable as not only do they counteract the hegemonic discourse that exonerates the State by revealing this complicity, but they also undermine this discourse by exposing the processes by which it is maintained.

The question of cultural complicity is further developed in the third article, by Antoine Ducoux. In his piece with the title "Writing under the Influence: The Fiction of the Artist under Contract in Novels of Organized Crime from Italy and Mexico", Ducoux looks at three *narconovelas*, Yuri Herrera's *Trabajos del reino* (2004), Walter Siti's *Resistere non serve a niente* (2012) and Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's *Contrabando* (2008), all of which feature protagonists who are writers that are contracted to write for or about criminal kingpins. Ducoux argues that by dramatizing these fraught creative processes, the novels question the authority of fiction of organized crime, compromised as it is by contractual complicity with its subject matter. He contrasts the novels with investigative journalist Roberto Saviano's popular study of the Naples mafia, *Gomorra* (2006), the authority of which was infamously undermined by revelations that the author had embellished his own role in its purportedly truthful narrative. Following Walter Siti, Ducoux defends a "self-conscious and productive use of ambiguity" (56), which forces readers into the position of critical interpreters, in other words, the detective position.

The truth value of fictional organized crime narratives is at the heart of the fourth contribution, by Amber Phillips. In her article "'Old Mafia' and 'New Mafia' in the Novels of Saverio Strati, 1957–1977", she examines the evolution of Calabria's 'ndrangheta in three novels by Saverio Strati. These novels demonstrate the value

of fiction as privileged truth teller identified by Astorga Almanza, having been some of the first written sources to break the pact of silence that had protected mafia activity. What interests Phillips are the ways in which these fictions have been used as sources by scholars from the social sciences, who cite them as if they were eyewitness accounts. In particular, she examines Strati's value as a chronicler and commentator on the shift from the "traditional" cultures of the "old mafia" practices to the modern, more entrepreneurial "new mafia". Phillips reveals that while the chronology of this modernization is as elusive as the 'ndrangheta itself, in his novels Strati goes against the sociological consensus that associates mafia culture with traditional Calabrian values.

Cultural explanations for the Italian mafia are at the centre of the fifth article ("'Mezzogiorno di fuoco e sangue': Narratives of Organized Crime and Stereotypes of the South in Songs from Northern and Central Italy"), in which Marcello Messina examines five decades of popular musical representations by Italian musicians largely singing in support of people in the Southern Italian regions affected by mafia violence. As with Zavala's critique of the *narconovela*, however,—and contrary to Phillips's findings regarding Strati's novels—Messina judges these songs to perpetuate the culturalist and frequently racialized myth that people from Italy's South are inherently prone to mafia violence. He shows how textual, musical and extra-musical features of the songs analysed work in concert to symbolically absolve the State of any responsibility for the mafia's criminal activities.

Racialized explanations are flipped in the final contribution to the collection, titled "Thompson, Céline and Tavernier: An Historical Echo Chamber of Western Imperial Ideology". In a radical shift of perspective, Sophie Watt demonstrates that the greatest acts of organized crime resulted not from the activities of criminal organisations in the conventional sense but were perpetrated by colonial powers. In a reading of Bertrand Tavernier's film *Coup de torchon* (1981), Jim Thompson's novel *Pop. 1280* (1964), and Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), Watt demonstrates how the greatest, State-perpetrated harms—colonialism, and the mass enslavement of people from Africa—echo down through history and across cultures. The texts and film she analyses work together to make visible, and to strongly critique, that pervasive justification for this form of organized criminality on a global scale: Western imperial ideology.

Watt's article is a fitting conclusion to the collection, acting as it does as a clear reminder that the great crimes, far from being prevented by the State, have been committed in its name. It recalls Tilly's argument on the nature of the State as a form of organized crime. Some of the key questions then that arise from this essay collection might be: how can culture address the State? And what is the relationship between consumers of culture and the State? Can critical readings of the kind proposed by Ducoux and demonstrated in the other contributions do anything to address the problem of organized crime? Although the collection would suggest that the jury remains out, it is clear that when it comes to culture and organized crime, the stakes are high. The risks of misreading or misinterpreting may not be as great as they were for Lönrott, but they are serious nonetheless.

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